

CHAPTER XIV

THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY ACTION

by Thomas P. Holland

ADVOCACY FOR RETARDED PERSONS

To persons labeled as retarded, the allocation of social resources and human services in this country has been limited. Before the 1950s few services were available to them besides residential care in remote institutions. The subsequent rise of the parents' associations provided a framework for organized political pressures at national, state, and local levels for increased services and resources for mentally retarded citizens. The 1960s saw a series of legislative actions which sharply increased the appropriations in this direction; and by the early 1970s, the federal government alone was spending well over a half a billion dollars per year for this group.¹

In the next decade, one area of human services needing extensive attention is the development of a range of supports or "social utilities" to enable handicapped persons to live in their communities.² The conviction has grown that our society can and should provide a basic supportive framework to enable retarded persons to have a life style as near as possible to community norms.³ Not less than others, retarded persons need the community services that many people draw upon, such as employment referral or counseling, recreational resources, financial guidance, health care, and others. Frequently, however, such services are not readily available to this group for a variety of reasons, which may range from a simple lack of the service to a systematic discrimination in existing services against retarded individuals. . . .

¹ Robert Segal, *Mental Retardation and Social Action*. Springfield, 111.: Charles C. Thomas, 1970; Thomas P. Holland, Changing social policies on mental retardation, *The Social Service Review*, 46, No. 2 (June 1972), pp. 251-262.

² Alfred J. Kahn, *Investments in People: A Social Work Perspective*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Urban Studies Center, 1963, p. 6.

³ Bengt Nirje, "The Normalization Principle and Its Human Management Implications," in Robert Kugel and Wolf Wolfensberger (eds.), *Changing Patterns in Residential Services for the Mentally Retarded*. Washington, D.C.: President's Committee on Mental Retardation, 1969, pp. 179—195; Gunnar Dybwad, *Challenges in Mental Retardation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964, pp. 83-98.

The effort to develop a normal environment for any minority group must overcome limited access to resources and services. Furthermore, groups which have suffered systematic exclusion may need an even more active effort to mobilize and coordinate the delivery of human services to them. This paper will examine some of the strategies which could mobilize supportive human services in the community on behalf of retarded persons.

Advocates for retarded persons may come from numerous sources: individuals whose families or friends include a retarded person, neighborhood groups or school committees, parents' associations, religious organizations, staff or boards of private or public human service agencies, community or regional planning boards, and elsewhere.

The methods of action available to such advocate groups are varied, but generally involve the *planned exercise of social and political influence* to expand the share of community resources and services available to retarded persons. Such activities begin by specifying the service needs of this population as well as by identifying the community resources available to meet such needs. Next, the methods by which the services may be expanded or oriented toward retarded persons must be analyzed. The advocating group then must measure its capacities and resources for influencing the target services and then match those "levers" against the objectives. Let us examine these basic processes of selecting targets and objectives for change and applying our resources to bring about the desired outcomes.

DOCUMENTATION OF NEEDS AND POTENTIAL SERVICES

To derive accurate plans for social action, an interested group must begin with a careful examination of the situation it seeks to change. Initially it must carefully document the *needs* of its consumer group. The service needs of retarded persons, like those of others, vary in extent, scope and duration. To live in the community, many retarded persons need varying amounts of a range of services: housing, employment, financial planning or assistance, education, recreation, health care, and others.

For example, fewer retarded children would have to leave their families and enter institutional care if they had equal access to such resources as day care and kindergartens, after-

school recreational and athletic programs, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, not to mention such basics as equal attention and opportunities in public schools.⁴ Likewise, far more adult retarded persons could live more normal lives in the community if they had training in the basic components of employment—not only the development of marketable skills, but also such necessary supplementary skills as handling job interviews, getting along with supervisors and fellow employees, getting to and from work, arriving punctually, and so on. Although some retarded persons may need special assistance in financial management, this could be viewed merely as an extension of many persons' use of expert assistance in such complex responsibilities as preparing their tax forms or handling their property transactions.

Basically this initial phase should document the specific needs of retarded persons to enable them to pursue normal lives in the community. With such needs specified, a group of advocates could set the initial broad goals of obtaining the services required to meet these conditions.

Attention is then directed outward across the community to identify the existing services and resources. Following the list of needed services, such questions arise as: which of these services exist for any group in this community; whom do these programs now serve; to what extent are they actually or potentially available to our group; how accessible are they; how effective are they; and finally, what would it take to make them more satisfactory for our needs. (Community Service Directories developed by many "United Way" agencies may be useful beginning inventories of the range of available human services.) While the group might find one or several potential resources for some of its documented needs, the existing services will probably fail to match other needs, indicating gaps in the service resources of the community.

THE ALLOCATION OF SERVICES IN THE COMMUNITY

Some of the existing community services probably devote few of their resources to retarded persons. Such situations do not exist because of chance or some "master plan" and often, as numerous parents have discovered, do not yield to individual appeals for change. Rather, the existing distribution of services

⁴ Gunnar Dybwad, *The Mentally Handicapped Child Under Five*. New York: National Association for Retarded Children, 1969.

—be they housing, finance, recreation, health, or others—results from the policies, values, and numerous political forces which maintain the present situation. Influences to constrain or restrict services further counterbalance influences to extend services. The competing interests of many groups interact to achieve the existing allocation of resources.

For example, a parents' association in one community was presenting a plea to the school board for expansion of pre-school programs and vocational training opportunities for the retarded. One board member was active in a local taxpayers' league fighting against any expansion in public expenditures. Another was sympathetic with the proposal of a large landowners' group advocating reduced property taxes and a shift to greater reliance on other sources of revenue. Also represented was a growing group of parents and teachers demanding that any new expenditures go first to sharp expansion in drug prevention programs. Whose interests would prevail? Without some shifts in influence, this situation was stalemated.

To intervene effectively in one's own community, one must understand the social forces which maintain the existing distribution of resources. Often the initial response to inquiries takes some form of "That's all our budget allows for." Humans, however, create a budget; and, if so motivated, they can change it. Hence, any examination of limitations or gaps in services must dig deeper into the influences acting upon the decision-makers who control the distribution of resources.

Such an investigation should not only identify what forces are operating to maintain the present situation, but also specify what influences would bring about the desired change in each situation and what levers could exert these influences. The persons or groups with the authority to make the needed changes must be identified. Further, the persons or groups who may control or influence these people must be recognized, as well as the nature, extent, and channels of their influence on the decision-makers. Then, the available methods can be addressed.

INVENTORY OF RESOURCES FOR INFLUENCE

Having specified what each change would require, we can then turn to an inventory of our own base or stockpile of resources for action. What of ours could influence the decisions of the group we want to change? Beginning with a careful analysis of our own group's membership or constituency, we can document the range and extent of resources accessible to

us. Numerous tools of kinds of resources can overcome resistance and change a social situation. Any list of them would at least include:

1. Personal energy
2. Professional knowledge
3. Money and credit
4. Popularity and charisma
5. Political standing
6. Social standing
7. Legitimacy or legality
8. Special position for receiving and controlling the flow of information⁵

Varied social resources influence decisions in varied ways. One way to categorize the means of influence is (1) persuasion, (2) inducements, and (3) constraints.⁶

PERSUASION

Probably the most frequently used method of trying to bring about change is persuasion. Individually or in groups, advocates have approached community agencies with appeals to them to modify some aspect of their program—be it eligibility requirements, nature or extent of services, or other practices. These advocates have marshalled evidence of insufficient or inappropriate services or of unmet needs and argued to persuade the administrators or commissioners to change their agencies' policies or practices. The matter is referred to a committee for further study; the desired change is postponed indefinitely.

While rational persuasion is doubtless the easiest and least problematic method of attempting to influence decisions, it is also possibly the least effective. As a result of reasoning or facts alone, few policies change regardless of the good will with which the proposal may be presented. More subtle but more powerful influences bring about and maintain the policies and practices of community agencies, and they will respond only to equal or greater social forces.

Of course, objective information and reasoned arguments are useful and necessary tools. But when we analyze what is

⁵ Nelson W. Polsby, *Community Power and Political Theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963; Robert Morris and Robert H. Binstock, *Feasible Planning for Social Change*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 118—119.

⁶ William A. Gamson, *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, 111.: The Dorsey Press, 1968, pp. 73-81.

actually required to change a given situation, we must ask, "To what extent will persuasion help?" "With whom?" "Under what circumstances?" "What sort of approach will best accomplish our objective?"

INDUCEMENTS

Agencies, boards, and policies exist not only for obvious reasons but also for the private goals and interests of the groups and individuals which set them up and control them. Such factors are no less real or powerful because they are not readily apparent. People conduct their activities and make decisions for a variety of rewards, from personal satisfaction or benefits to increased recognition, status, or power. For example, the elected official usually anticipates the voters' reactions to his taking one or another position on an issue. Before proposing a change, the manager of a private social agency will weigh his board members' likely reactions. A public agency's administrator must consider the positions of the members of the legislature.

An inducement offers new advantages to the decision-maker's situation. The advocates seek to exchange some resource of theirs for the desired decision or change. Such bargains may be objectively stated or implicit, immediate or long-term. Because a certain city council candidate supports zoning variances for group homes for retarded persons, for example, one group may publicly endorse him; or the group may offer him its support if he will do so.

Many respond to the opportunity for favorable publicity. An agency may desire public credit for discovering an unmet need which it could serve or for leading the way in resolving some community problems. If a group is willing to trade leadership or public image or some other resource for the solution or change it desires, the agency may be induced to take the necessary action.

CONSTRAINTS

The reverse of advantages is disadvantages, and advocate groups may likewise consider applying undesired influences to the social situation. Imagine that a parents' association told a councilman that it would support his reelection only if he voted against a restrictive ordinance. If the councilman had

always had the group's support, then such a communication would threaten him. If the group had opposed him in the past and he had no expectation of their support, the statement would promise a new advantage to him. If he had never heard of them, or if he knew they could not deliver on the promise, he would probably ignore the statement.

Most groups avoid unfavorable publicity. The threat to expose a practice of discrimination in services may suffice to bring about a change. More entrenched problems may require legislative changes, public investigations, or lawsuits. One of the outstanding examples of the skillful and effective use of adverse publicity to stimulate social change is the recent report on discrimination against retarded and emotionally disturbed children in one state's public schools.⁷ Numerous examples show the use of legal action to bring about better services: such as the case of *Wyatt v. Stickney* in Alabama, which focused upon the right to treatment; *Florida Association for Retarded Children v. State Board of Education* and *Case v. State of California*, which focused on the right to public education; and many others.⁸

MATCHING RESOURCES TO OBJECTIVES

To make promises or threats is a hollow activity if the influencer has no control over the resources necessary to implement them. Hence, a group must carefully inventory its resources and reexamine its goals realistically in light of its actual capabilities. Possibly some situations are controlled by influences beyond reach. Some proposed changes may be so extensive that reaction would defeat the attempt. A group might have to scale down an objective or modify the scope of change to a level feasible for the resources it can actually bring to bear.

Some decision-makers may respond to certain forms or methods or amounts of influence but not to others. Hence a group must attempt to match up resources to targets carefully, seeing that inappropriate efforts do not waste or overextend its capacities, but bring them to bear efficiently.

Some objectives may require a level of influence beyond a group's immediate control. However, it can temporarily post-

⁷ Task Force on Children Out of School, *Suffer the Children: The Politics of Mental Health in Massachusetts*. Boston: The Task Force, Inc., 1972.

⁸ See Paul Friedman, *Mental Retardation and the Law: A Report on Current Court Cases*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Mental Retardation Coordination, D.H.E.W., July, 1973; also see the "How to Sue Package," National Association for Retarded Children, Arlington, Texas.

pone direct action and invest a portion of its resources into developing a greater stock of influence for later use. For example, it may seek an alliance with another organization which is pursuing similar goals. Or, it may seek to get a key community person onto its board so as later to influence his decisions.

IMPLEMENTING AND MONITORING THE ACTION PLAN

To achieve its objectives, a group must formulate a feasible and realistic plan of action. A sequence of steps and alternatives can be designed, along with designating appropriate persons to implement each one. Tasks must account for the skills of the individuals or group and the receptivity of the target groups.

The action plan may involve several steps and influences brought to bear sequentially or simultaneously. As one writer suggests: "The actions of many persons, each of whom has independent authority, must be concerted for a proposal to be adopted; the proponents of the proposal try to concert these actions by exercising influence—by persuading . . . rewarding, punishing, and otherwise inducing; meanwhile the opponents exercise influence either to prevent the actions from being concerted or to concert them in behalf of some alternative proposal which they prefer." ⁹

For us to know the extent to which our efforts are paying off, we will want to develop further methods of keeping track of the original needs and objectives of our group. Are services being opened up and brought to our group; are they available in sufficient quantity and at the needed times; are the services effective in meeting the original needs; were there unexpected consequences?

Such documentation helps us in numerous ways. Primarily, it will constitute specific evidence about which of the needs of retarded persons are being met and to what extent. Beyond this, it will provide reinforcement and satisfaction to our group to see that our efforts have paid off. Further, such evidence can be fed back publicly to the group providing- *the service* as positive indications of their success as service providers. Finally, a system of monitoring needs and services will allow us to identify additional needs of retarded persons and thus provide

⁹ Edward C. Banfield, *Political Influence: A New Theory of Urban Politics* New York: Free Press, 1968, p. 307.

an information base for formulating new objectives.¹⁰ We can then begin anew the cycle of action and advocacy on behalf of these persons.

In conclusion, the supportive community services needed by retarded persons are varied, and community agencies have often ignored or underserved this group. Changes will come arduously and slowly, but these situations are not impervious to appropriate influence carefully applied. Strategies for mobilizing the needed services are based upon careful analysis of the social forces to which the agencies respond and the skillful accumulation and application of such influences to appropriate points in the target agencies. Social and political resources can induce or constrain decision-making groups to allocate the services needed by retarded persons. Such carefully planned and executed advocacy efforts can result in marked changes in the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of human services. With such increased supports, more retarded persons will benefit from human services and be able to live normal lives in our communities.

¹⁰ Gregory M. O'Brien, *Information Utilization in Human Service Management: The Decision Support System Approach*. National Conference on Social Welfare Forum, 1973. New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming.